

VETERANS ADMINISTRATION CENTER

FORT HARRISON, MONTANA

HISTORY OF  
FORT WILLIAM HENRY HARRISON  
1892 -- 1972



Prepared on the occasion of the 50th  
Anniversary of Fort Harrison as a  
Veterans Administration Facility  
May 19, 1922 - 1972





## HISTORY OF FORT WILLIAM HENRY HARRISON

From the U. S. War Department's book "Military Reservations," Fort Harrison was originally described as being located 6 miles west of Helena in Lewis and Clark County; area, 3,809.64 acres, more or less, comprised of main reservation, 1,040 acres, more or less, and water supply site, 2,769.64 acres, more or less.

It was first named Fort Benjamin Harrison by General Orders No. 84, Headquarters of the Army, Adjutant General's Office, 1892, in compliment to the President of the United States, Benjamin Harrison. The name was changed to Fort William Henry Harrison by General Orders No. 33, War Department in 1906 in honor of William Henry Harrison, 9th President of the United States.

The original reservation was acquired in 1893 by donation under authority of the act of May 12, 1892 (27 Stat. 33) subject to certain mining rights. By an act approved March 3, 1893, the cost of buildings and improvements was limited to \$200,000.

Colonel Broadwater and U. S. Representative Carter of Helena, Montana, were chiefly responsible for this Fort being located near Helena. "It served as a headquarters post and saw little active duty."<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Benjamin H. Frayser, a surgeon employed here in the 1920's, became interested and wrote a brief history of Fort Harrison.<sup>2</sup> "The Fort was built during the period of 1894 and 1896 by the following contractors: James Carlisle and Sons, G. S. Appleton, Nichols and Brothers, Emil Bruce and Gebhardt and Wagner. The sewer system was constructed by Frederick Younger, the water system by D. P. Wortman, and the roads by Kirkendall and Son.

"In compliance with S. O. 146/4 Dept. of Dakota, September 12, 1895, Companies B & E, 22nd Infantry, and a detachment of the hospital corps left Fort Assiniboine, Montana September 22, 1895 and arrived at Fort Harrison September 23, 1895. Detachments from the following organizations have been stationed at the Fort since that time: 2nd Infantry, 25th Infantry, 24th, 8th, 21st, 7th, 6th, and 14th Infantry. A joint camp of instruction of the 2nd and 3rd Battalions, 14th U. S. Infantry, and the Organized Militia of the State of Montana was held at this post from July 15 to July 23, 1912. After the 3rd Battalion of the 14th Infantry left, only a detachment of the Quartermaster Corps remained until April 10, 1913 when this detachment was relieved by the caretaker."<sup>2</sup>





From the Helena Independent newspaper of September 24, 1895, "The Fort Harrison Post was in operation as of 5:25 p.m. of September 23, 1895 when two companies of the 22nd Infantry under Captain Mott Hooton, who is in command for the present, took over from Captain Hoyt under whom the Post was built. Lieutenant Colonel Evan Miles who has recently been transferred to the 22nd Infantry will take over when he arrives at the Post."

During the time Fort Harrison was an active army post, there was gay social life and many Helena young ladies found husbands among the young officers stationed here.

The National Guard of Montana used the post off and on for rifle shoots. The National Guard was mobilized on June 19, 1916 and remained at Fort Harrison until July 2nd on which date the regiment left for duty on the Mexican border. The regiment returned to the Fort on October 16, 1916 and was mustered out November 3rd under Colonel Dan J. Donohue. On March 27, 1917 the Montana National Guard was again mobilized under call of the President and remained until November 1917. During this time the regiment was doing duty over the State of Montana protecting railroads and major industries. The regiment was under command of Colonel John McGuiness during this time and continued under his command at an eastern camp and in France. Major Jesse B. Roote succeeded Colonel McGuiness as commanding officer at the Fort and remained until the Fort was occupied by a detachment of Coast Artillery, Washington National Guard.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of World War I, there was a great demand for hospital beds. There were several departments in Washington set up to handle services for veterans--the Bureau of War Risk Insurance, the Public Health Service, and the Federal Board of Vocational Education. "With the cessation of hostilities on November 11, 1918, the Bureau of War Risk Insurance and the Public Health Service faced a grave situation . . . The country was woefully lacking in preparedness for peace as it had been for war. According to figures compiled by the House of Representatives, the number of U. S. soldiers 'wounded not mortally in World War I totaled 204,000' . . . Now for the first time the new benefits provided were to be put to the test. Five agencies of the Government were handling various aspects of the new benefits. At the Bureau of War Risk Insurance, the insurance program by this time was on a fairly level keel . . . The medical activities of the Bureau consisted of rating claims and authorizing hospitalization . . . . Staffs were inexperienced and inadequate. The processing of claims was slow. On March 3, 1919 Congress appropriated funds for and authorized the hospital expansion under Public Law 326."<sup>4</sup>





In 1918 there was an office located in the old Wheat Building at the corner of Main and Edwards Streets, Helena. It had a staff of four, headed by Leif Fredericks. At this time there were not enough beds in Public Health Service hospitals and the law provided for use of contract hospitals where the average cost of a bed was \$3 per patient per day.

"Though it was a far cry from what was needed, Public Law 326 was a first step toward what was to become the world's largest hospital system."<sup>4</sup>

Under date of November 20, 1919, it was virtually agreed by and between the Secretary of the Treasury and the Secretary of War that the Bureau of Public Health Service of the Treasury Department should have possession and control and the U. S. Public Health Service was, under the above date, permitted to use the military reservation for hospital purposes. On June 6, 1921 all of the buildings at Fort Harrison having been made suitable for hospital purposes, U. S. Public Health Service Hospital No. 72 was opened as a general hospital with a bed capacity of 150. An executive order of April 29, 1922 effected the transfer.

On May 19, 1922 this hospital along with other Public Health Service hospitals for veterans was taken over by the Veterans Bureau and the name was changed to U. S. Veterans Hospital No. 72.

There was a great demand for tuberculosis beds and this hospital was designated a tuberculosis hospital on June 30, 1923, and a capacity established for 300 beds. By 1925 the demand for TB beds had decreased and accordingly on July 15, 1925, its designation was changed to that of a general medical and surgical hospital.

The first commanding officer of the hospital was Major T. D. Tuttle, who was in command from February 22, 1921 to January 27, 1922, when he was transferred to St. Paul, Minnesota. Major Tuttle was succeeded by Major L. A. Walker who was here until September 1, 1923. Lieutenant Colonel W. R. Leverton was in command from September 1, 1923 to July 11, 1924. Major William Park was appointed Acting Medical Officer in charge July 11, 1924 and continued in this capacity until August 28, 1924 when he was transferred to the U. S. Veterans Hospital No. 85, Walla Walla. Colonel W. D. Judkins was transferred here from Walla Walla August 28, 1924 and remained here until October 16, 1927 when he was transferred to Livermore, California. Colonel Herbert C. Watts succeeded Colonel Judkins, having been transferred here from San Francisco, California.





Among the files in the Director's office are four issues of a publication entitled, "Fort Harrison Forum", the first four issued dated March 9, April 16, May 12, and June 21, 1928 which give information about the social doings and many activities which we have continued all these years. Hospital Day in 1928 was celebrated with a program at the hospital, a piano solo, a string quartet, a vocal solo, and a speech by Judge H. B. Meyers, Associate Justice of the Montana Supreme Court. Tea was served in the Nurses Home with the wife of the commanding office presiding. The Helena High School Band provided a concert for patients in the evening.

In March of 1928, Will Rogers visited the hospital and spent an hour with the patients. He became interested and donated the type and press for printing the "Forum." At Easter time the War Mothers and the Women's Club gave flowers for the patients.

In the April 16 issue, there was news of crafts carried on by patients, rug making, toy making, and a classroom where a patient could brush up on his arithmetic or learn to type.

In the June issue, it was announced that the Fort Harrison Recreation Council was to be organized to handle the entertainment and decorating of the wards on special occasions. They met the first Wednesday of the month, a forerunner of our VAVS Voluntary Services Program, and we still meet the first Wednesday of the month.

Patients played bingo. There were entertainments on the wards for patients. At Christmas time local children from the churches came to sing Christmas carols. These programs were arranged by the Red Cross director.

In 1929 the Lieutenant Harold Joyce Post No. 1116, Veterans of Foreign Wars, published a brief history of the hospital. At that time Dr. Watts was Commanding Officer. Dr. George H. Parmenter was Regional Medical Officer and Clinical Director. Dr. Ben H. Frayser, Dr. Lance E. Briscoe, and Dr. M. H. Axline, surgeons; Dr. M. H. Watters and Moses E. Sherer, ward doctors; Dr. Frederick B. Nather, roentgenologist; Dr. Robert F. Smith, neuropsychiatrist; Dr. Harry L. Myers and Dr. John L. Gill, outpatient services; Dr. William H. Fortin, TB specialist; consultants were Dr. John L. Treacy and Dr. William W. Copenhaver; Dr. Edward F. Keys was Chief of Dental Service; George C. Van Sickle was property custodian; Claude L. Meredith, claims examiner; Miss Clara Quinlan, chief nurse; Alice Budge, chief dietician; Miss Georgia Donnell, librarian; Miss Emergene Gronlund, pharmacist; Mrs. Julia B. Sherwood, social worker. There was a physiotherapy department, an occupational therapy craft shop, and a library.





The Red Cross, under the direction of Mrs. Ottilia K. Ashton, occupied part of the old recreation building, now torn down. In this building there was a hostess room which was at the disposal of families of critically ill, a large theatre and dance hall, pool rooms, the office of the Red Cross director and her assistants.

The Post canteen occupied a brick building adjoining the Red Cross building. This building had originally been the bowling alley when there was an active army post in operation. The Post Office and the barber shop was also housed in this building.

On June 1, 1929 the Regional Office was moved to Fort Harrison and combined with the hospital. Various structural changes were made in the old building and a covered runway was built to connect it and the old canteen which was used for offices.

In 1932 two new units were constructed at Fort Harrison, consisting of a combined infirmary and clinical building and a central heating plant with the necessary steam distribution, costing well over \$500,000.

In the early 1920's a sub-regional office was established in Helena as a subsidiary to the District No. 10 Office in Minneapolis. In 1925 the sub-regional office became a Regional Office located in the city of Helena. The sub-regional office was activated by Mr. C. T. Busha, Jr., as sub-district officer, and he became manager of the Regional Office when it was established in 1925. About July 1928 Mr. C. T. Busha resigned and Mr. D. K. Dalager, Chairman of the Rating Board, was appointed Regional Manager. He continued in that capacity until June 1, 1929 when the Regional Office was consolidated with the VA Hospital at Fort Harrison, at which time he became Assistant to the Manager. Dr. H. C. Watts who had been Manager since 1927 continued in that capacity until June 1946. When the Regional Office was separated from the hospital in 1946, Mr. Claude L. Meredith, Assistant Manager, became Regional Office Manager and continued in that capacity until October 1, 1948 when the two activities were again combined and he was named Manager of the VA Center.

In October 1935 this section of the country was visited by severe seismic disturbances; the epicenter being located about 7 miles northeast of the VA facility. In October 31, 1935 the second most severe earthquake cracked the top of the power-house chimney and it was necessary to close down the heating plant. On October 18, 1935 there were 197 patients in the hospital; some were discharged. Since the law did not allow for private hospitalization of all the patients, arrangements were made to transfer them to other VA hospitals. A special train was





ordered and took all the patients with the necessary doctors and nurses to the VA hospitals at Walla Walla and Roseburg, Oregon, leaving late the night of the 31st of October. The following morning efforts to shoot out the brick below the part of the chimney that was shattered were successful causing the shattered top of the chimney to fall free of the boiler house; the boilers were fired and the Regional Office continued, moving from place to place in various buildings while the buildings too badly damaged to repair were torn down and others repaired for use. There had been numerous quakes, well over 2,000, and during this period certain of the personnel were housed in tents on the National Guard portion of the reservation together with a number of refugees from Helena. The office of the Regional Office was used for sleeping quarters at night.

Dr. Watts, the Manager of the Hospital, sent to General Hines, VA Administrator, a copy of the Bureau of Mines report on the earthquakes entitled, "Montana Earthquakes of 1935," and a study was made to determine whether to re-open the hospital on that site.

It was determined that repairs would be made and the hospital was re-opened on February 15, 1937, and it became a Center once more.

In the summer of 1942 a joint commando group of American-Canadian paratroopers were trained on the Fort Harrison reservation, on the grounds occupied by the Veterans Administration and connected with the VA buildings and utilities, with the ultimate idea of turning them over to the VA when they had served their wartime purpose. This was done in 1944. A news release of that time states, "Pursuant to and under authority of the Act of Congress approved June 22, 1944 (58 Stat. 204) control and jurisdiction of lands, together with improvements thereon, owned in fee by the War Department and known as the hospital area, Fort William Henry Harrison, Montana, were recently transferred to the Veterans Administration. The tract of land transferred approximates 180 acres, exclusive of a 40-acre plot which has been reserved for a future sewage disposal plant at the outfall into Seven Mile Creek."

Representatives from the War Department completed the transfer of buildings and property accountability to the Veterans Administration. Certain of the temporary buildings constructed during World War II were transferred complete with furnishings and equipment. The transfer was approved June 22, 1946 and the War Department representative came to Helena March 10, 1947 to effect the transfer.





During this period beds for 450 patients were operated. The brick hospital building had 165 beds and there were more beds in four temporary buildings all connected with ramps. There were two librarians on the staff, four occupational therapists, three dieticians, three physical therapists, and a classroom with a teacher where patients who had not completed high school could study while hospitalized. Patients with back injuries who were on Stryker frames studied by means of ceiling-projected books.

During 1946-47 a sub-regional office was activated in Billings 245 miles from Helena. There were 15-20 employees in that office which operated for about one year. In 1946 ten satellite contact offices were established throughout the state. Within a few years all of these were closed except the office at the VA Hospital in Miles City and the Billings and Great Falls offices which are open twice a month. The Regional Office staff numbered about 75 employees in the 1920's and varied according to the amount of work and the programs in operation. It expanded to 312 personnel in 1946.

At that time Mr. Paul Hatton was Manager of the hospital, having taken over from Dr. H. C. Watts. Mr. Claude Meredith was Manager of the Regional Office.

On September 30, 1948 the hospital and Regional Office were consolidated again effective October 1, 1948, and it became known as the Veterans Administration Center, Fort Harrison. Mr. Claude Meredith became VA Center Director while Mr. Paul Hatton transferred to Camp White (Medford), Oregon, to set up a domiciliary in that location.

On July 21, 1960 a celebration was held at Fort Harrison in observance of the 30th anniversary of the Veterans Administration. Mr. E. R. Van Sickle, Assistant Manager, was master of ceremonies and the Governor, J. Hugo Aronson, gave the main address. Mr. Claude Meredith made some remarks on the 30th anniversary and the ceremony was completed with a social hour.

Modernization of the physical plant began in June 1961 when a contract was let to build the new 160-bed hospital to replace the one then being used. Construction of the \$3,975,000 project was started that summer. To those of the staff who had looked forward to the new hospital, those were exciting days as we watched the engineers dig the ground for samples. Then came the day when we had floor plans to look at and an opportunity to report to Washington on the space allotted to us and to order the furniture.

The building was completed and turned over by the contractor on July 16, 1963. Patients and equipment were moved into the new hospital during August of 1963.





A contract for the second phase of modernization at Fort Harrison was let on June 29, 1963 on a bid of \$640,000. The contract called for some remodeling of the interior of the old hospital building to make room for all the Regional Office activities and medical administrative staffs. The old wooden buildings were taken apart and moved. Road improvements and parking lots were completed, and landscaping carried on through the next spring and summer.

The dedication of the new hospital took place on Sunday, September 29, 1963 at 2 p.m. on the 63rd birthday of the Director, Claude Meredith. Senator Lee Metcalf was the main speaker and William J. Driver, Deputy Administrator of Veterans Affairs, represented John S. Gleason, Jr., then Administrator. Dr. Turner Camp, Area Medical Director, attended and Governor Tim Babcock also spoke. All residents of the community were invited to attend and to take a tour of the new hospital.

The hospital contains 96,000 square feet of floor space and has 160 beds located on two floors divided between medical and surgical patients. The other floors house the dental clinic, x-ray service, clinical laboratory, operating suites, physical medicine, canteen, library, and offices. Equipment was all new. The hospital then employed 253 persons with a total payroll of \$1.8 million annually. The total medical operating budget for the Fort Harrison VA Hospital, including contract hospitalization and aid to State Homes, amounted then to \$2.4 million annually.

In 1967 Mr. Meredith reported in a news release that direct payments to Montana veterans and their families amount to more than \$26,000,000 and of that amount \$12,000,000 went to service-connected veterans; \$3,800,000 went for death compensation and pensions; \$3,300,000 was paid out in insurance dividends, and \$6,900,000 for hospitalization, loan guaranty and like services.

In April 1968 Mr. Meredith died of a heart attack at his Fort Harrison home. Mr. Meredith had served as a private in the Marine Corps in World War I and attended the University of Montana after his service, receiving his law degree in 1926. He came to the VA as claims examiner in 1926 and served in several capacities during the years after.

Replacing Mr. Meredith was Loryn E. Kopan who came from the Boise VA Center. Mr. Kopan had served in the Quartermaster Corps in Washington during World War II. After the war he sought service in the VA and served in several hospitals before going to Boise as manager in 1958. Mr. Kopan commented in a news release, "The nation's 25,846,000 veterans are survivors of 'Federal' wars. Veterans' affairs are the nation's business."





In November 1969 Mr. Kopan moved back to Boise and Mr. Leon M. Wallace came to Fort Harrison as Director on November 3. Mr. Wallace was formerly Special Assistant to two Veterans Affairs Administrators in Washington, former Director of the Insurance Department, and Director of the VA Center at Wichita.

On July 21, 1970 the Veterans Administration Center at Fort Harrison celebrated the 40th anniversary of the VA with a ceremony outdoors in the afternoon. Mr. Wallace remarked that in 1930 when the VA was created, there were about 4,000,000 veterans in the United States. In 1970 there were more than 27,000,000. He remarked, "Our agency is now especially interested in the returning Vietnam serviceman and is going out into the community to try to start him on an education program or assist him in securing employment." At this ceremony there was a prelude of music; remarks by our Assistant Center Director, Mr. John W. Horton; singing led by Mrs. Carrolle Rushford; an address by Governor Forrest Anderson, and awards to staff and volunteers.

Mr. Wallace moved on to the Pittsburgh Hospital late August 1971 and our new Director, Mr. Charles C. Walter, arrived in September from Fargo, North Dakota. Mr. Walter, a native Montanan, has served 29 years in the Government service, most of which has been spent at eight stations of the Veterans Administration.

To bring the statistics up to date, as given to the press by Mr. Walter, there are 4,933 veterans in training this year in Montana; 63.29 percent are in college, 29.29 percent in below college training, and 7.42 percent in on-the-job training. Of the total number in training in Montana this year 4,475 are Vietnam era veterans.

Following a general trend in American medicine, the VA is now using "ambulatory care" to a much greater extent, Mr. Walter said, shortening the periods of actual stay in the hospital and freeing beds for additional patients. The number of patients treated at the local hospital grew from 2,325 in fiscal 1970 to 2,421 in fiscal 1971. Vietnam veterans treated this year through the VA hospital system totaled 87,303 compared to 66,519 last year.





The occasion of the writing of this history is the celebration of the Golden Anniversary of the Veterans Administration Center at Fort Harrison on May 19, 1972. Montana and Helena Chambers of Commerce as well as veterans service organizations, auxiliaries, and civic clubs from all over Montana will work with us to celebrate this occasion. Mr. Herbert Goodwin, Military Affairs Chairman of the Helena Chamber of Commerce, will aid Mr. Walter, who is General Chairman. Don Ingels and Jack Graveley will handle publicity; Mrs. Forrest Anderson and Mrs. Edna Hinman will arrange the banquet.

Many dignitaries have been invited to help us celebrate our "Half Century of Progress."

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CHARLES C. WALTER  
Director  
May 19, 1972







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